

Workers report:

IBEW acknowledges problems with ballots for rail contract but refuses to conduct re-vote

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According to electricians who are members of the IBEW and who personally spoke to IBEW Railroad Department head Al Russo via telephone in recent days, the IBEW has acknowledged that a significant number of ballots were not properly sent to workers.

The IBEW claimed last Wednesday that a contract based on widely unpopular recommendations from federally-appointed mediators passed narrowly by only 150 votes. Workers were immediately suspicious of the results, and the IBEW's own internal statistics showed the number of "questionable" and "undeliverable" ballots exceeded the margin of "victory." The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, an independent group of workers fighting for workers control, issued a statement late last week demanding a re-vote under workers' oversight.

The IBEW has given different explanations to different workers, raising further questions about whether the union disenfranchised so many workers intentionally in the recent rail contract vote. Despite acknowledging the fact that many eligible workers were not able to vote, the IBEW has still refused to conduct a re-vote.

An IBEW member named Tim told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Mr. Al Russo informed me it was an IT issue with members addresses not being updated. So, the ballots got sent to the wrong houses/old address. And the people who complained were told it was too expensive to overnight new ballots. That was his

explanation around 8 a.m. on the 4th of Oct, 2022." (Emphasis added).

Another electrician and IBEW member in Nebraska said, "When I spoke with Al Russo on September 21 [to ask for a ballot after not getting one], he told me that a vendor was hired to supply the envelopes and I believe print the ballots also. He said the vendor had failed to print the system council number and the local number on the envelopes. Why should that hold up delivering the ballots? All that need be said is for union reps to tell the workers to add it."

These two answers do not seem to correspond to one another, and neither response addresses the question as to why so many workers were evidently denied the right to vote. However, Russo's answers to IBEW members are highly revealing.

The claim that overnighting ballots would have been "too expensive" does not hold water. The IBEW has \$575 million in assets, and every year the international office in Washington D.C. pays \$66 million in workers' dues money in salaries to bureaucrats. Al Russo's salary is \$223,317, roughly the equivalent to overnighting envelopes via USPS (flat rate=\$26.35) to 8,500 workers, more than the entire rail department.

The idea that the union cannot afford to make sure workers are able to vote on a contract is absurd. After all, if the ballot issue was the product of an innocent mistake, the very least the IBEW could have done would have been to extend the deadline by which ballots would be accepted and counted.

But Russo's claim that overnighting ballots would be prohibitively expensive also says more than he intended.

If it were just a question of mailing a few mistaken

ballots, the cost of overnighting would be negligible. But if hundreds, or thousands, of workers did not receive ballots, then the costs would add up. In other words, it appears Russo inadvertently admitted that the total number of workers was significant enough to clearly impact the outcome of the contract vote.

Since the IBEW claims the contract “passed” by a narrow 150 votes, this means a re-vote is necessary to protect the democratic rights of railroad workers who wanted to have a say in the terms of their labor for the next years.

IBEW members are highly suspicious of Russo’s failure to explain widespread issues with balloting.

Referring to Russo’s statement to the WSWs that he had “no comment” for workers who were not able to vote due to mailing issues, a Nebraska electrician said, “It sounds like it’s time for Mr. Al Russo to step down or be removed from his position. He said ‘No comment’ and ‘No comment.’ Is he hiding something or just that arrogant!?”

A West Coast railroader told the WSWs, “I think with the shenanigans going on today, [in order] to take away from fraud, paper ballots should be given to members and there should be ways to verify it. You should be able to drive anywhere to vote and verify your ballot using your government ID. It should be no different how we do elections in the U.S. but with the IBEW, it sounds like there’s nothing but fraud, confusion and willful neglect. It would be conspiracy as well, if union officials come together and do what they can to make sure ballots don’t go out to individuals. If those statements are true, then that’s conspiracy. How is it possible that someone has lived in the same address in 20 years and not get their ballot? All it takes is one person to vote ‘no’ to swing the whole election. We can return to our right to strike by telling our union no. There’s a lot invested for the unions to force through this contract.”

The worker added, “My fellow coworkers talk about it, they all believe that it’s fraud. They’re hiding votes and not allowing their members to vote. If they falsify that election, they deny their right to strike. I believe that workers are still 90 percent ready to go on strike.”

As for Russo’s statements that he had “no comment” to workers who could not vote, the worker added, “I’m familiar with being on record, and when you’re being asked [a question] as a representative, by saying ‘no

comment’ [that shows] he is fearful of his wrongdoing. If he wanted to be truthful he would’ve talked to you guys. A ‘no comment’ for me is an admission of guilt. We look at it as guilt.”

The rail carriers are using the claim that the contract “passed” to carry out a further attack on the democratic rights of electricians and all rail workers. In Barstow, California, workers report that they are being threatened with termination if they protest, attend pickets or wear any pins or t-shirts that criticize the vote on the grounds that the contract has been passed.

Despite this, workers across the rail industry continue to demand a re-vote on the IBEW contract to ensure that their democratic rights are respected. In several rail yards, workers are distributing petitions to inquire as to how many workers did not receive ballots. In most yards that have conducted informal polls so far, between a fifth and half of workers did not receive ballots.

Workers should fill out this survey and share it with coworkers and on social media to get a better sense of how many workers did not vote. So far, the survey results show that roughly 40 percent of workers did not receive a ballot or that they received a ballot too late to cast a vote.

If the rail struggle remains in the hands of the IBEW apparatus and the bureaucracies of the other rail unions, the union leadership will continue to employ methods of deception to force through contracts and prevent a strike. But if the workers organize themselves on the basis of a fight to give power to the rank-and-file, they can unlock their immense potential power. This requires the building of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee into a broad network embracing workers in every rail yard to link workers together in a common fight and to ensure that workers have control over voting, over the conduct of this contract struggle, and over conditions at their workplaces.



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